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ABSTRACT

Most freshman composition textbooks are inadequate in giving information to students on how to interpret dictionaries: instead of presenting them as aids in exploring word usage, textbooks foster a naive trust in dictionaries as arbiters of all usage questions. Rather than treating words as discrete items to be mastered without knowledge of underlying word relationships, vocabulary lessons in freshman textbooks need to investigate (1) differences among dictionaries, (2) derivational morphology--how roots and affixes combine to produce meaning, (3) semantic differentiation, (4) denotation and connotation of various affixes, (5) similarities of word roots, (6) word etymology, and (7) new word generation through compounding. Students above the basic writing level should have a clearer picture of how words develop and of how they change in acceptability, form, meaning, and use. (MM)

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EXPANDING STUDENTS' ABILITY TO UNDERSTAND AND USE WORDS

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Expanding Students' Ability to Understand and Use Words

by Marvin K. L. Ching

Mina Shaughnessy in Errors and Expectations noted Basic Writers' slow progress in mastering vocabulary, an onerous task, with dissonant results from malapropisms; the use of the wrong form of the word, including the wrong part of speech, an erroneous root, or an incorrect suffix; an injudicious use of level of formality; non-idiomatic uses of prepositions; and inappropriate use in certain contexts.[1] However, there are skills and understandings which intermediate and advanced freshman college writers and even college freshman instructors need to acquire. The learning of such matters involves a real understanding of the workings of language—etymology, lexicography, word formation, semantics, historical change, and rhetorical study.

First, an understanding of lexicography and the differences among dictionaries together with a healthy skepticism of all dictionaries as absolutely authentic sources for deciding on the correct status of a word is necessary. Dictionaries tend to be far behind actual usage. The word arcade, for example, in current dictionaries on the market merely mentions as its meanings an architectural structure with arches or a covered passageway with arches on both sides and shops lined on either side of the pathway. The modern and common meaning of arcade, meaning a commercial place for playing games, is not cited in any dictionary despite the fact that penny arcades long appeared before today's video-game arcades. In the 1981 unabridged Random House Dictionary and in Webster's III, only the entry under the p's for penny arcade cites the definition for a place for games. The word movie in the 1961 edition of the American College Dictionary

is, moreover, labeled U. S. colloquialism, probably because of a clipping from moving picture. The 1976 New College Edition of the trusted American Heritage Dictionary judges balding to be informal and records its acceptance by 55% of the Usage Panel. Quotations from Usage Panel experts on the status of the word reveal the extreme reactionary attitude toward balding, probably because of a shift in part of speech from the word bald to a verbal form: according to the usage note, "representative responses" include Isaac Asimov's "distasteful but necessary" and Katherine Anne Porter's "entirely vulgar" judgments of the word's status. Students and teachers will also probably be surprised to learn that tycoon, meaning a wealthy businessman, was deemed colloquial by the 1961 American College Dictionary because the original use of the word referred to the shogun of Japan, its etymology deriving ultimately from Chinese words meaning 'great prince.' Thus, tycoon, in its most common sense today, is an extended use of the original definition.

But where dictionaries are dilatory in accepting the facts of usage, they are amazingly silent about restricting usage which most language users do not accept as felicitous. For example, none of the dictionaries, including the AHD, places a status label on the verb orientate.

Both students and teachers should understand that the verbal -ize suffix, though loathed by English teachers and popular pundits of language like Edwin Newman, is really a normal process of forming new parts of speech from old ones. Certainly the older words bearing this suffix are respectable: baptize, realize, itemize, visualize, criticize, fraternize. Newer words with this verbal suffix are accepted in various realms of discourse—for example, in business, government, or disciplines like psychology, science, or linguistics—but excoriated by literary stylists, popular pundits of the language, and, of course, English teachers.

Undoubtedly, despite the efforts of the English profession to restrict finalize and prioritize, the frequency of these words heard today indicates that they are fast becoming part of the respected corpus of our lexicon. Words like actualize or self-actualization, though judged jargonish by English teachers, must be learned by psychology, sociology, and counseling students; synthesize is commonly used in science; and traumatize probably prevails in health and psychological texts. Though causing English teachers to wince, internalize and passivize are key terms in linguistics. Thus, the student must adapt to writing for certain discourses and realize that English teachers' admonitions to eradicate -ize words is not to be believed and applied, except in writing for English classes. The audience determines acceptability.

Similarly, impact as a transitive verb without any following preposition like on or against is a late development and thus frowned upon, though widely used in government, economic, and ecological contexts. The 1972 OED Supplement records the first instance of this term in a 1972 publication called Air Pollution: "An aerosol moving toward an obstacle may impact articles on the obstacle."

A study of derivational morphology—of roots and affixes, that is, of prefixes and suffixes, and how they combine to produce meaning—is also most essential. According to Pyles and Algeo's The Origins and Development of the English Language, affixing accounts for 30-34% of innovations in recent English.[2] Moreover, affixes combine with their roots to produce meanings very different from a literal paraphrase of a combination of the root of a word with its affix or affixes. As Akmajian et al. demonstrate in Linguistics: An Introduction to Language and Communication, the combined meaning is often more than the sum of the parts of a word; moreover, the meaning often undergoes

some specialization so that semantic drift occurs.[3] On pages 135 and 136, for example, Akmajian et al. show these phenomena are illustrated in the exercises on what happens to words when the prefix re- and the suffix -ize attach to words. Most often, re- does not simply mean only 'back' or 'again.' Thus, the words rewrite, rework, rethink, or repaint do not necessarily possess the literal meaning of writing, working, thinking, or painting in the same way again. Instead, the affix with the verbal root, depending upon the context, often denotes doing something in an entirely new way. Akmajian et al. also indicate semantic drift occurring in words ending in -able, such as in readable, questionable, payable, and washable (pp. 124, 125). Thus, readable does not mean 'able to be read,' but, instead, 'pertaining to reading that can be performed easily because of stylistic grace and clarity'; questionable does not mean just the sum of its parts—'able to be questioned'—but 'pertaining to interrogation because of highly doubtful or ethical considerations'; payable does not mean merely 'able to be paid' but 'should be paid' by a certain date in the expression "A bill is payable on Dec. 1"; and washable, meaning 'able to be washed,' is restricted to fabrics—hence, a baby is not washable (Akmajian et al., pp. 124, 125).

Other instances abound. When -al is added to phenomenon, the resulting word means more than 'pertaining to a phenomenon'; it means 'prodigious' or 'great.' Likewise, visionary means more than 'one who sees'; it can mean one who sees unrealistically or too idealistically.' Thus, affixes often relate to their bases in complex ways.

Moreover, semantic differentiation occurs in these cases: 1) when there is more than one affix having approximately the same meaning and capable of attaching to a word; 2) when there is a base form of

a word and different forms of this same base with an affix. Not only semantic differentiation but also differentiation in rhetorical effect or differentiation in grammatical or syntactic usage may occur.

Semantic differentiation is evident in words with the same root with different affixes having approximately the same meaning and is evident in parallel forms of the same root attached to a suffix because parallel forms only remain functional in a language if distinctions can be made. In religiousness and religiosity, for example, the latter term does not merely mean 'a devoted practice of religion' but also 'a hypocritical practice of religion for outward show.' Similarly, semantic differentiation has occurred in these groups of words:

protector (one who protects)
protectionist (one who advocates trade barriers against foreign competition)

protectiveness (state, quality, or act of protecting)
protectionism (economic system advocating trade barriers against foreign competition)

committal (assignment to an institution, like a prison or an asylum)
commitment (dedication to a person or thing)

recital (a program, like a music recital)
recitation (a rehearsal of words)

advance (the position of a military unit or a prepayment)
advancement (progress or promotion of a certain study, group of studies, or a certain area of life, as in the advancement of education, the advancement of the arts, the advancement of science, or the advancement of industry)

humanity (mankind in general)
humaneness (kindness and decency of treatment)

assignment (task or work given)
assignation (a tryst)

reviser (one who changes something)
revisionary or revisionist (one who changes by deviating from official Marxist doctrine)

future (time after the present)
futurity (time in the distant future)
futuristic (pertaining to avant garde manifestations)

perpetuation (continuation or furtherance of something)
perpetration (continuation or furtherance of something bad)
perpetuity (occurrence or continuation of something in the future for an endless length of time, often used in law)

ambulance (a motorized vehicle; originally, according to the OED, a moving hospital following an army giving succor to wounded soldiers—thus, wagon or cart for carrying the wounded off the field)
ambulation (movement, especially by walking)

See page 60 of Mark Aronoff's Word Formation in Generative Grammar for other examples.[4]

The different forms of the same root may cause a distinction not only in denotation but also in connotation. They may at times come from 1) different forms of the same part of speech of the word (for example, different principal parts of a verb), 2) different Romance languages (for example, the French versus the Latin form of a word), or 3) a different part of speech containing the same root. Thus utilitarian (used for pragmatic ends) comes from French through a Latin noun, while useful (capable of being used) comes from French through a Latin past participle whose infinitive form has the same root as the uti- form of utilitarian.

Different forms of the same root and different attachment of suffixes to this root can cause different connotations, as in the neutral tone of deviator and the socially undesirable implications of deviant and deviate.

At times one suffix sounds more formal or elevated than the corresponding form. In the following words, for example, -ness

conveys more folksiness than its corresponding suffix -ity to indicate a verbal noun meaning 'the state, result, or extent' of the adjective to which the suffix is attached:

heterogeneousness heterogeneity	jolliness jollity
ambiguousness ambiguity	laxness laxity
creativeness creativity	productiveness productivity
monstrousness monstrosity	spontaneousness spontaneity

At times prefixes with roughly approximately the same meaning may also show nuances in denotative or connotative distinctions. For example, listed from the most highly colored to the most neutral idea of a person or thing's reputation is this order of words: disreputable, unreputable, and nonreputable. Similarly, with the words deformed, malformed, and unformed, the last one has the least bad denotation and connotation; between deformed and malformed the latter connotes less grotesqueness so that an obstetrician may say to a mother that she had a malformed (rather than a deformed) child. Thus, choice of prefix can be used to mitigate a problem. Entirely different in denotation are the words amoral and immoral through the attachment of a- and im- to the base moral.

The denotation and connotation of various suffixes should also be studied. Sometimes a given suffix may have both colored and neutral meanings as in -ese and -ism. Derogatory meanings of -ese, for example, apply when the ending denotes a type of jargon in certain writing, as in journalese, pedagese, and educationese (see Pyles and Algeo, p.266, and the OED), but the suffix can also signify persons, languages, or places, as in Portuguese, Japanese, and Chinese; and Cantonese, Pekinese,

and Milanese. Similarly -ism denotes, according to the OED, a state of excess, as in alcoholism and mongolism; various undesirable or bad phenomena, systems, or ideologies, such as racism, sexism, Maoism, and Stalinism; and religious beliefs of other countries, such as Buddhism and Hinduism, so that it is a cliché for certain religious groups to talk about the -isms of various cults and ideologies. However, neutral and good connotative meanings are also assigned to -ism words as in criticism, baptism, exorcism, plagiarism, syllogism, parallelism, patriotism, heroism, and monotheism. Moreover, to counter the over-generalization that -ism only pertains to bad items, one may point to various religious denominations and groups which unabashedly call their branch of Christianity or system of beliefs by an -ism: e.g., Presbyterianism, Protestantism, Catholicism, Calvinism, Lutheranism.

Syntactic differences can also occur with different suffixes attached to the same root of a word, at times with some differentiation of meaning. Some roots with a particular suffix can pluralize: necessity can pluralize, but not necessitation; jolly as slang can pluralize to form jollies, meaning 'fun or excitement,' as in "The man had his jollies,' unlike the noncount noun jolliness; and humanity can pluralize to mean 'subjects in the arts and social sciences,' contrasting with humaneness, a noncount noun meaning 'the quality of kindness and decency.'

Similarly, deceit, deception, and deceptiveness, though all etymologically derived from the same root and much alike in denotation, have some semantic as well as syntactic differences. Although deceit always has a bad connotation, deception and deceptiveness may indicate cleverness or skill in performing a task. Thus, we may say the deception or deceptiveness of the needlework, but not the deceit of the needlework; Bill's

deception or deceptiveness in skilfully faking the ball, but not Bill's deceit in skilfully faking the ball. As complex noun phrases, all three nouns may express the agent, the causer of the action, as a possessive noun or prepositional phrase beginning with of: Mary's deceit or the deceit of Mary; Mary's deception or the deception of Mary; Mary's deceptiveness or the deceptiveness of Mary. But only deception can take a noun phrase with the preposition of following the head word to indicate the receiver of the trickery. Thus, we may say Carlyle's deception of Bill but not Carlyle's deceit of Bill nor Carlyle's deceptiveness of Bill. Grammar and meaning therefore differ with different manifestations of the root and/or suffix.

Moreover, the same suffix can relate to various roots in different ways. The suffix -ation in relegation means 'the act or result of relegating,' but in fascination, 'the state of being fascinated with some person or thing.' The -able suffix attaches to verbs and means 'able to be' as in likable, controllable, and lovable, but added to nouns, -able has different semantic relations, as in peaceable, companionable, and fashionable (see Akmajian et al., pp. 118-124).

A certain affix can also leave a hole in the pattern of its attachments. For example, though the suffix -ment attaches to -tain words like attainment, detainment, containment, and retainment—maintenance, not maintainment, is the noun form of maintain. Likewise, for sustain, the noun form is sustenance rather than sustainment, the -ment form apparently rare, listed only in the 1981 unabridged Random House Dictionary. Moreover, sustenance has specialized to mean 'the sustaining of the bare necessities of life.' Like suffixes, prefixes can also show distincitve and peculiar attachments to bases: un- attaches to the base couth to produce uncouth,

without the root being able to stand alone, an unexplainable dropping out of the Old English base, the positive form of the word.

Sometimes, however, it is more helpful to look at the similarities rather than the differences in parts of words to help us realize how certain words are related. Often differences in stress, attachment of affixes, or pronunciation blur the common stem of certain words. Little do many persons realize, for example, that these words have the same stem and are thus semantically related: ámnesty and amnésia; esthetic and anesthetic ('feeling' vs. 'away from feeling'); pródigal and prodígious (g pronounced as g vs. j); símile and similárity; sign and signature (silent g vs. pronounced g); and hérpes and herpetology (both words coming from a root meaning 'to creep'). The effect of seeing the underlying relation between these pairs of words may be like the experience of realizing for the first time that the morning star and the evening star—Venus—are one and the same.

Functional shift—change in part of speech—which creates 14-26% of new words (Pyles and Algeo, p. 290), also accounts for differences in stress, where noun and verb forms are spelled exactly the same. Although both forms are sometimes pronounced with the same stress, at other times, the two forms are stressed differently in two-syllable words, with the noun having its stress on the first syllable and the verb having its stress on the second syllable, as in the noun frágment and its corresponding verb fragmént. Moreover, the noun tends to take on a more specialized or concrete meaning, and the corresponding verb form, denoting a more general or abstract notion, as in these words, which may be noun or verb: ornament, implement, fragment, regiment, ferment, and affect

(see Aronoff, pp. 71, 72). The realization of the difference may help a student to use the verb form in abstract contexts, such as fragment as a verb in "We feel fragmented with all of the demands placed upon us."

As Norrick (pp. 90 and 91) points out, functional shift—change in part of speech—may occur because of metonymy.[5] Thus, knife, a noun and a verb, is a mixing of instrument and act; open, a verb and an adjective, is a mixing of act and result. There is hence an underlying principle operating in functional shift.

In word formation, affixes which change part of speech may be explained also by metonymy (Norrick, pp. 86-100): blacken and black and opener and open, for example, can be explained by cause-effect or instrument-act relationships.

Parallel suffixes for corresponding adjectival roots can produce differences in meaning which can be explained by subjective and objective interpretations of the root (see Algeo, pp. 250 and 251).[6] A subjective interpretation means that somebody or something 'possesses, experiences, or feels' the idea expressed by the adjective. An objective interpretation means that somebody or something 'evokes or causes' the idea expressed by the adjective. A hateful person subjectively interpreted means that the person possesses, experiences, or feels hatred; a hateful person objectively interpreted means that the person evokes or causes hatred.

The -ed form for past participles and the -ive suffix attached to the same verbal roots create differences in subjective and objective interpretations of the words created. For example, the difference in meaning between oppressed and oppressive and repressed and repressive

is that the subjective -ed form is interpreted as 'experiencing, feeling, or possessing' the notion in the root and where the objective -ive form is read as 'causing or evoking' the notion in the root. The semantic difference between the past participle and the present participle can also be explained through subjective and objective interpretations, with the -ed form having the subjective interpretation and the -ing form having the objective interpretation. This principle thus explains the difference between magnified and magnifying and glorified and glorifying.

Understanding the different manifestations or forms of the same root may also help students to see relations among words. The words protégé and protector, different forms of the same underlying root, are related: the former derived ultimately from the infinitive of the Latin verb meaning 'to protect'; the latter derived ultimately from the past participle of the same Latin verb. In terms of subjective and objective intrepretations discussed in the preceding paragraph, protégé has the subjective interpretation—'a person experiencing protection'; protector, the objective interpretation—'a person or thing causing protection.'

Similarly, the relationship between different meanings of the same form of word used in different worlds of discourse can be understood through etymology. Realizing that the etymology of charismatic means 'concerning a gift of grace or talent from divine favor' (see the OED) may enable a person to see the relationship between charismatic churches, where members speak in ecstatic mystic utterances or tongues, and charismatic celebrities, who have an unexplainable power of attracting people.

Underlying principles of interpretation should also be studied for compounding, which accounts for 28-30% of new items added to our vocabulary today (Pyles and Algeo, p. 289). The compounds bomb shelter and bomb proof, for example, are related by the notion 'against,' as in 'shelter against a bomb' and 'proof against a bomb,' but in bombshell the reading is 'shell of a bomb.' As Miller points out in "Images and Models, Similes and Metaphors" (p. 250), these compounds are all to be interpreted differently: a bulldog is a dog that resembles a bull; a honeybee is a bee that makes honey; and an armchair is a chair that has an arm.[7]

Such understanding of diction requires a more systematic and deeper study of the vocabulary of our language. Most freshman textbooks are clearly inadequate in informing students on how a dictionary's usage admonitions are to be interpreted: textbooks foster an unfounded and naive trust in the dictionary as an arbiter of all usage questions rather than as a guide or starting place for answers to questions. Current lessons on vocabulary of freshman textbooks are often guilty of treating words as discrete items to be mastered without presenting the underlying relationships among related words—how the roots and affixes of such words connect in complex networks of meaning—and without showing how the meaning of a word is often more than the sum of its parts because of metaphorical extension and other types of semantic drift. Surely students above the Basic Writing level should have a clearer and truer picture of how words develop, grow, and change in acceptability, form, meaning, and use.

NOTES

[1]See Chapter 4 of Errors and Expectations (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), pp. 187-225.

[2]Thomas Pyles and John Algeo, The Origins and Development of the English Language, 3rd ed. (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1982). Further references to these authors come from this source.

[3]Adrian Akmajian, Richard A. Demers, and Robert M. Harnish, Linguistics: An Introduction to Language and Communication (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1979), pp. 135, 136. Further references to Akmajian et al. come from this book.

[4]Mark Aronoff, Word Formation in Generative Grammar, Linguistic Inquiry Monograph One (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1976). Subsequent refrence to Aronoff comes from this source.

[5]Neal R. Norrick, Semiotic Principles in Semantic Theory, Amsterdam Studies in the Theory and History of Linguistic Science: Series IV—Current Issues in Linguistic Theory, Vol. 20 (Amsterdam: John Benjamins B.V., 1981). Subsequent reference to Norrick comes from this source.

[6]John Algeo, Problems in the Origins and Development of the English Language, 3rd ed. (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1982). Subsequent reference to Algeo comes from this source.

[7]George Miller, "Images and Models, Similes and Metaphors," in Metaphor and Thought, ed. Andrew Ortony (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), p. 250.